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ABSTRACT

This study of the images of women as portrayed on new television programs in 1985 not only compared them with the images of the last season, but examined the similarities and differences between these characters and real life women. Each continuing female character on every new show was coded for race, age, occupation, marital and socioeconomic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. Analyses of these data showed several disappointing trends: a decrease in the number of female characters on new programs, a reemergence of shows with exclusively male continuing characters, a return of the two-parent family on situation comedies, an increase in the number of cop/detective shows, and a decrease in the number of minority female characters. One positive note was the premiere of one program exclusively about older women, "Golden Girls." However, in general, the 1985 season presented an artificial world of male buddies where women are invisible, irrelevant, or victimized. (EW)

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Trouble on the Set

An Analysis of Female Characters on 1985 Television Programs

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TROUBLE ON THE SET

An Analysis of Female Characters on 1985 Television Programs

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INTRODUCTION

This year's Commission report marks our fourth annual critique of network television programs. Since 1982 we have been analyzing the portrayal of women on the premiering shows of each fall season and releasing our findings to industry executives, educators, advocacy organizations, and to the general public.

In the four years since we began publishing these Commission reports, American viewing of network television has declined by a significant percentage. Dissatisfied by the limited choices offered by the three networks, audiences have been turning to alternate forms of entertainment, such as cable television, video cassette recorders, and pay TV. As a result, the networks must now compete not only against each other but also against newer technologies in order to attract viewers.

Although the competition persists year-round, it is particularly acute in the fall when each network offers its new crop of shows to the American public. Enormous amounts of energy and money are poured into the development and production of these programs, which compete to attract the largest number of viewers and win the ratings battle.

Each year the Commission evaluates these new programs according to their portrayal of women. We then publish the findings as part of our public education activities on women and the media. Our reports compare the similarities and differences between female TV characters and real life women and note changing trends in the image of women on television from season to season. This year's report notes several trends particular to the 1985

television season: a decrease in the number of female characters on new programs, a re-emergence of shows with exclusively male continuing characters, a return of the two-parent family on situation comedies, an increase in the number of cop/detective shows, a decrease in minority female characters, and the premiere of a program exclusively about older women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to provide a comprehensive view of the image of women on the 1985 television programs, the Commission compiles and analyzes data gathered from the new shows. We code the following information for every continuing female character on each new program: race, age, occupation, marital and socio-economic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. This information is obtained from viewing program tapes and from interviewing network programmers and production company staffs.

Included in our study are all prime time network entertainment programs that contain women as regular characters. Excluded from the study are all of daytime programming and the following prime time programs: news, movies, sports, specials, and the new anthology programs, such as George Burns' Comedy Week, Amazing Stories, The Twilight Zone, and Alfred Hitchcock Presents.

Although almost all shows included in this study premiered during the fall, we also monitored programs which aired earlier in 1985 but are still considered part of the new season. These programs include Mr. Belvedere, Moonlighting, Crazy Like a Fox, and Hometown.

This year's Commission report, "Trouble on the Set: An Analysis of Female Characters on 1985 Television Programs," was funded by a grant from the Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

REPORT FINDINGS

Formats of the New Shows. Out of 19 new series premiering in 1985, nine (47%) are cop/detective shows. Five are situation comedies, three are action adventures, and two are dramas. Four additional new programs are anthologies, containing different stories and characters each week; two of these shows, The Twilight Zone and Alfred Hitchcock Presents are remakes of and named after successful TV programs of the 1950s and 60s.

As in previous years, the 1985 season contains a number of programs modelled after popular shows already on the air. The immensely successful Cosby Show has spawned Charlie and Co. and 227, both situation comedies about black families. Miami Vice, a fast-paced detective show, has given birth to The Insiders and Hollywood Beat; Moonlighting is a version of the male/female detective team in Remington Steele. Two new shows are patterned after movies: Stir Crazy is based on the popular movie of the same name, and The Equalizer, an ex-CIA agent who operates outside the system to obtain justice, is a subdued version of Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry.

Fewer Female Characters. In sharp contrast to the 1984 TV season when every new program except one contained continuing female characters, this year three programs (16%) contain no female characters at all (Hollywood Beat, The Equalizer, MacGuyver). An additional six programs (32%) are essentially all-male shows with females in minor, supporting roles (Spenser:

For Hire, Stir Crazy, The Insiders, Lime St., Helltown, and Crazy Like a Fox).

Not only were there more female characters on the new programs last year, many of them held leading roles. Two of those programs, Murder, She Wrote and Kate and Allie, have performed extremely well in the ratings. However, they have spawned no imitators. Shows portraying sole male leads or buddies, on the other hand, are omnipresent this season (The Insiders, Spenser, Hollywood Beat, Stir Crazy, Crazy Like a Fox, The Equalizer, MacGuyver, and Helltown). Only three programs, Lady Blue, 227, and Golden Girls, contain females as the sole lead characters. The remaining major roles for women are confined to situation comedies, except for Maddie Hayes in Moonlighting and the characters in Hometown.

The Profile. Female characters on new dramatic programs tend to be young, white and single, while their counterparts on situation comedies are older, more racially diverse, and more likely to be married.

Situation Comedies. On every new situation comedy, except Golden Girls, all of the major adult female characters have husbands and children (Growing Pains, Mr. Belvedere, 227, Charlie and Co.). This return to the two-parent family is a change from last season when the majority of female characters on situation comedies were either divorced or widowed. 227 and Golden Girls are the only situation comedies this season featuring single female characters in regular roles.

Almost all of the women on these new comedies are in their 30s or older; on the program Golden Girls, the characters are all over 50. As opposed to past seasons when situation comedies featured young, single women, such as Laverne and Shirley, today's female characters are more mature.

Of the five situation comedies premiering in 1985, two contain almost entirely black casts; the eight females on these two shows account for all the minority female characters on new programs this season.

Compared to the real world where almost 40% of mothers are homemakers, the homemaker mother is an extreme rarity on situation comedies. Except for Mary on 227, all mothers work outside the home; Maggie on Growing Pains is a newspaper reporter, while Diana on Charlie and Co. is a school teacher. Even Marsha Owens on Mr. Belvedere has gone back to school in order to resume her career.

This TV trend toward characters who are working mothers has been growing for several years, so that now working mothers on television are more prevalent than their counterparts in real life. A decade ago, however, the opposite was true, when more real mothers were working outside the home than moms on TV.

Unlike the wealthy families portrayed on this season's new dramatic programs, no situation comedy households are extremely rich, although the family on Mr. Belvedere does have a live-in butler. The other families range from middle class to comfortably

affluent, unlike previous seasons when affluence abounded even on situation comedies.

Dramatic Programs. The picture looks quite different for female TV characters on dramatic programs. Except for Hometown and a few minor characters in Our Family Honor, almost all the women on the new dramatic shows are single (Spenser, The Insiders, Stir Crazy, Lady Blue, Our Family Honor, Lime St., Moonlighting, Helltown, Misfits of Science).

They are also young. Except for Mrs. McKay and Mrs. Danzig in Our Family Honor, no characters are middle aged or older. All are white. In contrast to the jobs held by women in the real world, the vast majority of occupations for women in dramatic programs are those of detective, cop, and adventurer (Moonlighting, Lady Blue, Our Family Honor, Stir Crazy, Misfits of Science). On programs where female characters have minor, supporting roles, they tend to work in traditional female jobs. On Lime St. Evelyn is a housekeeper and Celia is a secretary, while on Spenser, Susan is a guidance counselor.

The world inhabited by female TV characters on dramatic programs is a wealthier one than that of situation comedies. Although Madelyn Hayes in Moonlighting has been embezzled out of her fortune, she still is portrayed as a wealthy, glamorous woman. Also wealthy is Alice West, the only female continuing character on The Insiders. Divorced from an extremely rich man, she is an editor of a news magazine. In addition, the Danzig

family on Our Family Honor is very rich, as is the Culver family on Lime St.

Racial Segregation. Of 19 new programs premiering in the 1985 season, only two contain minority female characters (227, Charlie and Co.). The eight black females on these two programs account for all the minority women on the new fall shows; there are no Hispanics or Asians, even in minor roles. In a 33% decline from last year when there were 12 minority characters on six new shows (three situation comedies, three dramatic programs), all of this year's minority females are on situation comedies, rather than being spread across program types. NBC airs 227; CBS airs Charlie and Co. ABC is the only network with no minority females on any of its new programs.

The news is slightly better for minority male characters. Three new dramatic programs feature black/white buddy teams where black males are given major roles (The Insiders, Stir Crazy, Spenser). In addition, Misfits of Science includes a black male character as part of a five-person investigative team.

In a significant change from past seasons when black characters on TV lived in disrupted families and black children stayed with guardians or relatives, most of this year's black TV families are traditional ones, containing two parents.

Program Themes and Messages. There is a sharp distinction between this season's dramatic programs and situation comedies concerning the worlds they portray and the messages they deliver.

Aside from the obvious differences dictated by drama and comedy, the genres reflect two extremely different world views.

Dramatic Programs. The world of dramatic shows is a world of danger and violence, especially for women. This season marks the return of the "woman-as-victim" theme in action/adventure and cop/detective shows. From the opening credits of The Equalizer which feature women as faceless victims in elevators and on subway platforms, to shows whose plots revolve around females being stalked and murdered, viewers this season are exposed to female brutalization in ways more graphic than ever before.

For example, the Equalizer, who "helps the helpless," rescues a midwestern teenager from a slave ring where girls are drugged, chained and murdered. Kate Mahoney on Lady Blue chases evil teenage boys who stalk and kidnap women and then eviscerate them with scalpels and dump their bodies; one of the murder victims is a close friend of Kate's. On Our Family Honor, police officer Frank McKay goes after a pimp who has murdered a 17-year-old girl by ripping open her back with a coat hanger. The pimp also murders a woman prostitute who is one of Frank's informers.

When female characters aren't being drugged, kidnapped, tortured, or murdered, they are often reacting to threats against their safety or are being portrayed as helpless and needing assistance. For example, Susan Silverman, the girlfriend on Spenser is frequently sent out of town or placed in hiding when Spenser's enemies threaten to harm her. On The Equalizer, a teenage Russian ballerina allows herself to be an easy prey for

kidnapping and must be rescued by Robert McCall. On Lime St. a beautiful young princess is threatened by murder; when she is saved by James Culver, a man twice her age, she immediately falls in love with him and asks him to have sex with her. And in Our Family Honor, Liz McKay, a rookie cop, frequently gets into dangerous situations and must be rescued by her male partner.

The few exceptions to the woman-as-victim trend this season include Kate Mahoney who plays Lady Blue, a cop who shoots first and asks questions later; and Maddie Hayes, the brains of a two-person detective team in Moonlighting.

Another theme in dramatic programs this fall concerns the breakdown of "the system" and the necessity of working outside the system to obtain justice. In these shows it is almost always males who become the vigilantes or the avengers of crime. Sometimes they are cops, sometimes detectives, and sometimes private citizens. In all cases, they have at their disposal arsenals of weapons which they use effectivly against wrongdoers. The heroes are never harmed in return.

Although often faceless, "the system" has been portrayed in new shows this season as an ineffective CIA, a bureaucratic FBI, an evil Pentagon, and a New York City police force unable to fight crime because it is hampered by excessive regulation.

Throughout this sinister world where structures have broken down and violence is rampant, strong heroes shoot without hesitation, resulting in gunfire in public places such as hotel lobbies, airports, and subway stations. Women are frequently the victims

of this violence and these public gun battles, adding to the sense of living in a dangerous world.

Several of the action and detective shows this season, however, have a light touch, mixing comedy with adventure. Programs such as The Insiders, Stir Crazy, and Moonlighting rely on off-beat characters, weekly disguises, and exotic adventures to hold viewer interest. A regular component of these shows is the weaving of musical/video segments into various episodes, much like MTV. At times these segments provide abrupt breaks from the plot line; dialogue is replaced by music and the action is often stylized.

Situation Comedies. In contrast to the sinister, dangerous world of most dramatic programs, this season's comedies are cheerful and benign. Evil is nonexistent and the worst flaws exhibited by regular characters are ineptitude or carelessness.

Nurturing fathers were evident in several of last year's comedy programs, and they are back again this year. Jason Seaver on Growing Pains is a psychiatrist who works at home while his wife resumes her career as a reporter. He at times becomes so involved in his children's lives that he embarrasses them by his intense affection and attention. Another nurturing father is James Culver in the adventure program Lime St. Although he is a high-powered insurance investigator, he spends a lot of time with his two young daughters. As a widower, he conscientiously tries to fill the role of both parents.

However, on Charlie and Co., Charlie is often more inept than nurturing. On one episode of the program, his teenaged daughter Lauren wants to have a discussion about sex when she finds out that her friend is pregnant. However, Charlie is bumbling and awkward; and it is up to the daughter, who remains calm, to reassure her father and coax him to talk.

Women in situation comedies, unlike their counterparts on dramatic programs, are not victims. They are neither passive nor helpless; rather, they are central characters in their families and adept problem solvers. Moreover, they are frequently portrayed as healthy, happy human beings who are able to hold a job and raise a family, just as their husbands do. In this sense, such characters more closely reflect the realities of American family life than the characters on the new dramatic programs.

Standing by itself this season is the new situation comedy Golden Girls. Unlike other programs which feature two-parent families with children, this show depicts four women -- three middle-aged and one older -- who form a family of their own. Three are widowed, one is divorced; all are living in an arrangement different from what they'd imagined when they were younger. Despite their changed circumstances, the women are resilient, funny, and dependent on one another. Golden Girls is the first situation comedy on television that exclusively features older women as buddies, without males or younger females as supporting characters.

CONCLUSION

The 1985 television season does not continue the progress of last season, when more women played leading characters, more minority women were visible in new shows, and the roles of women on TV were more diverse. Last year's female TV characters were not limited to law enforcement occupations nor relegated to traditional support roles for male leads, which gave viewers the promise of better things to come.

However, this season's programs, with a few bright exceptions, present an artificial world of male buddies where women are invisible, irrelevant, or victimized. At times, this trend becomes truly alarming.

In a society where physical violence against women is a real danger, programs which present females as invitingly helpless targets are irresponsible. In a society where women still face the hurdles of stereotyping and discrimination in the workplace, programs which convey their irrelevance do no social good.

This season's programs present two very different worlds: that of the situation comedy, where women have important roles as wives, mothers, workers, and friends; and that of the dramatic program, where men are in charge. And since dramatic programs outnumber situation comedies this season, theirs is the dominant message.

The new 1985 shows reflect a failure of imagination, an inability to create programming that is new and that embraces the

complexities of the real world. Many of this season's programs depend upon fantasies which are narrow and regressive.

Because of these failures, it is likely that the audience for network programming will continue to dwindle as viewers search elsewhere for entertainment that will provide them with a richness and diversity that is missing from many of this season's new shows.